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**Layering Screens: From Strategy to Intuition**

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# **Layering Screens: From Strategy to Intuition**

**by**

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## **Report**

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## **Abstract**

### **Layering Screen: From Strategy to intuition**

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The image we look at takes us elsewhere, outside of this present moment to a place the photographer decided to take our sight and mind. In that sense, the photograph becomes a window to another place. Barthes mentions that the photograph is invisible. Is it because the image has the power to make us forget about its host, the printed piece of paper? I'm interested in that piece of paper because it is the vessel of the image. It has a texture that gives a quality that activates the power of the image. A photograph is never really flat. It inhabits a space; it exists as an object.

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## INTRODUCTION

*« Une photographie est toujours invisible: ce n'est pas elle que l'on voit. »*<sup>1</sup>

In this quote, Barthes points at what a photograph consists of: an image printed on a piece of paper. The image we look at takes us elsewhere, outside of this present moment to a place the photographer decided to take our sight and mind. In that sense, the photograph becomes a window to another place. Barthes mentions that the photograph is invisible. Is it because the image has the power to make us forget about its host, the printed piece of paper? I'm interested in that piece of paper because it is the vessel of the image. It has a texture that gives a quality that activates the power of the image. A photograph is never really flat. It inhabits a space; it exists as an object.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by the author : *« A photo is always invisible: it is not it that we see. »*  
Roland Barthes, « La chambre claire », Gallimard Seuil, Paris : 1980, p. 120

## THE EMBODIMENT OF AN IMAGE

### Light beyond the threshold of the lens

The blink of light striking the film or digital sensor chip is the space of the *camera obscura*. I am interested in the lens bending the light into the right amount of brightness and setting it into focus as it meets its final journey as a chemical reaction or a multiplicity of electronic pulses being translated into binary codes. Here is a fixed image.

The projected image is one of the outputs of the photographic act. The image has been chemically set onto a translucent pellicle and encased into a slide frame. Nowadays, its most likely being digitally processed and compressed into a file to the right amount of pixel resolution on a X and Y axis. The projector is a reversed camera. The slide is loaded into the projector carrousel or the digital file is uploaded in a media player or in a computer then sent into the projector chip. As the power supply gets the perfect amount of electricity to the light bulb, an electrical spark starts the heating process that initiates the lighting device to reach the right amount of heat in order to get an accurate amount of lumens. Then the optical bloc of the projector allows the light beam to bounce into a network of mirrors and accurately send it through the slide or the digital chip. The slide filters the light and modifies its spectrum to shape the image. The digital process is a

rather more complicated one but results in the same end. The chip filters the light beam and shapes it to an image in grayscale. Then a color wheel filters the light again to give it its Red, Green and Blue tones. The raw light beam has become an image. The beam is then sent through the lens that will bend it in ways that the image will finally meet the screen into focus and to the desired size.

### **A conceptual pre-set for the technical image**

According to Flusser, traditionally, images were created by humans. Painters, for instance, are expressing themselves by painting images on a surface. They are the creator in between the image and its significance. Their work is to create a language in the form of image in their head and deliver it using the paintbrush and the paint and apply it onto the surface of the canvas. Once done, a painting is created and an experience is conveyed to the viewer. If someone wants to understand the painter's intention, one must acknowledge the image process that took place in the painter's head. With the up and coming of the technical image, this schematic dramatically changed. The process, the relationship to authorship and the unique status of the image has gotten more complex.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Vilém Flusser, "Towards a Philosophy of Photography", (London: Reaktion Books), 2000, p. 15 - 16



*« With technical images, however, the matter is not so clearly evident. It is true that with these images another factor places itself between them and their significance, i.e. a camera and a human being operating it (for example, a photographer), but it does not look as if this 'machine/operator' complex would break the chain between image and significance. On the contrary: The significance appears to flow into the complex on the one side (input) in order to flow out on the other side (output), during which the process – what is going on within the complex – remains concealed: a 'black box' in fact. The encoding of technical images must be aimed at an elucidation of its inner workings. As long as there is no way of engaging in such criticism of technical images, we shall remain illiterate. »<sup>3</sup>*

As Flusser states above, the black box is the concept of an hidden system or mechanism and, in this case, one of the technical image. It feeds from something on one side (input) and it is transformed or modified through a pre-set of parameters within. What came in at first then comes out (output) as a product. If we think about the camera obscura, we can think about light coming into the lens as the 'image' being fed into the black box (input). The black box being the camera (and its operator) are the sets of parameters that process the image, and then the photograph, 'the significance', being the product (output). Moreover, this concept can also be applied to the motion-picture theater. The input is the image, the black box is the theater (and its operator) and the output is the projected image.

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<sup>3</sup> Vilém Flusser, "Towards a Philosophy of Photography", (London: Reaktion Books), 2000, p. 16

I believe it is interesting to think about the space of caption and display of images as a hidden system. For the camera obscura, the parameters are set by the technology of the apparatus and the photographer's subjectivity and skills. It also includes the post production of the images. Whether it's still or moving images, the parameters can be manipulated accordingly to the intention of the artist, '*the operator*'. The other black box can be defined as the media platform. Depending which platform is chosen, the medium could be, in this case, a motion-picture theater or cinema. Its architecture is designed for the experience of film. The screen size, the floor angle, the sound system, the projector, all of these aspects, and more, are parts of the apparatus. The quality of the experience of the film is set by the operator and his choices in the design of the theater's space and the level of quality of the technology involve.

## **A photograph of an image**

In 2016, I started a series of photographs titled *Black Box (Boîte Noires)* taken in various projection rooms of various art institutions all across the world. I wanted to catch the glimpses of light, the dark textures of the space, the delicate yet coarse manifestations of an image. Depicted in these photographs are video and film works from different artists. However, in my photographs, I wasn't interested in appropriating these artists' work,

rather, I was interested in the formal, yet hidden construct of the object. I was interested in the object. Whether its a projected image, a film or a video, for me they are an architectural simulacrum and an analogy of the photographic act.

I see my photographs as printed black boxes of their own. They are the compression of a whole chain of the conceptual pre-set of the technical image. They are photographs of a projected image in a black box (projection space). This black box feeds on the output of the first black box, which is the artist and his camera (the operator). Flattened on a surface and encased in a frame, this project is a conceptual end point of the whole chain of the technical image. Framing my camera on images in their display environment and then taking a photograph of it is a way for me to address the embodiment of images. Like a collage, it stages the image in a set of highly contrasted forms, colors, lines and subtle textures. It is about the presence and absence of light. It is also about how images are presented to us. They exist through screens in a variety of sizes and shapes. They exist in an environment that is always part of the experience. It is also about space and therefore never strictly about flatness.

## BLUEPRINTS OF THE REAL

### **A series of inventions in the Victorian era by Royal Society members and Anna Atkins**

Young British botanist Anna Atkins<sup>4</sup> is known today mostly for her cyanotype work *British Algae* from 1843. As a young woman in the Victorian era, Atkins had access to recent technological knowledge through her father (John Children) who was a member of the Royal Society and friend of many scientists, inventors and pioneers in photography like Sir John Herschel and William Henry Fox Talbot. Not only did Atkins know about Herschel's cyanotype process, she also mastered it and brought the technique to another level. *British Algae* is known to be the very first book entirely made of photographs in the world. The complete form of this work was made in three volumes grouping 398 plates and 14 pages of texts, all reproduced with the cyanotype process. Since the science community was reserved only to male members at the time, her work was only considered as an amateur's hobby. Atkins mostly exchanged and shared with other fellow botanists of her community. Around those years, other scientists were developing similar processes like calotypes. In 1844, William Henri Fox Talbot released *The Pencil of Nature*, which was the first book including photographic reproductions published on a commercial level. In the 1840's the inventions of various photographic techniques were

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Atkins was an English botanist and a photographer. She is notably known for her book *British Algae*. It was the first book entirely made of photographs with a process known as cyanotype. It was published in 1843.

at its first breakthroughs and contributed directly to the inventions that followed in the decades after.<sup>5 6 7</sup>

Later on, the cyanotype process, also known as the blueprint, was used for a commercial output for the reproduction of documents such as architectural plans. It was a cheap and easy way to reproduce plans as the drawings could simply be layered over another emulsion paper sheet and exposed, therefore transferring the drawing onto it. This work process, which is quite similar to how Atkins was working, is a way to streamline a workload with precision at an affordable cost. It is also about evacuating the human sensibility as much as possible in order to have a clear and objective way to look at something. In Atkins early work, before she started using the cyanotype technique, she had several employees helping her to draw the various specimen of sea creatures such as cockles and clams. She would draw them as precisely as possible in order to expand her inventory. But drawing always had a subjective part in the process. Someone could possibly identify the person behind the drawing by looking at the way lines and shades were sket

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<sup>5</sup> Larry Schaaf, *Anna Atkin's Cyanotypes: An experiment in photographic publishing*, History of Photography Journal, Volume 6, Issue 2, London, 1982, p. 151 - 172

<sup>6</sup> Mike Ware, *Herchel's Cyanotype : Invention or discovery ?* , History of Photography Journal, Volume 22, Issue 4, London, 1998, p. 371 - 379

<sup>7</sup> Ann Garascia, *Impression of plants Themselves: Materializing Eco-Archival Practices with Anna Atkins's Photographs of British Algae*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, Cambridge, Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 47 No. 2 p. 267 - 303

ched. Not only was it faster and cheaper to use cyanotype, but the print was a clear outline of the subject itself without the interpretive process of someone looking and drawing.<sup>8</sup>

## **Work plans for the foundations of a language**

For me, cyanotype is a simple way to project and fix an object directly onto a medium. The cyanotype process is for me a way to engage with photography that is closer to the objects and materials I'm using in my installations. My cyanotypes are the blueprints of my own artistic language. They are the inventory of things laying around in the studio, film negatives not suited for high end printing on paper but interesting to include as part of my cyanotype series. They are like an index of what I'm actually working with. It's a sort of list of items. Even though it's not precisely a list with clear enumerations of the things, I use their forms to make images. The cyanotype becomes a plan, a blueprint of objects and forms to be used and laid out into space.

My cyanotypes feel like I'm looking either into the past or the future. I am never really sure at the moment when I'm making them. Its like reacting to an event. In that sense, I feel the same way as Rebecca Solnit when she speaks about the blue of distance:

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<sup>8</sup> Hope Saska, *Anna Atkins: Photographs of British Algae*, The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, Vol. 84, No. ¼ 2010, p. 8 - 15

*« For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that color of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, the color of there seen from here, the color where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains. »<sup>9</sup>*

In this quote, Solnit speaks about something floating in the air that lies ahead in between here and there. It can only be seen at a far distance but can never be reached or touched. For me, it speaks about the journey to be lived. Its that palpable feeling of a distant something desired. In regards to my cyanotype work, the process itself is somewhat similar. I have an idea, I have some tools and objects but never really what will come out. It's a photographic process with a very minimal set of parameters and a good part of it is uncontrollable as unforeseen events might occur. Then, the objects get systematically projected and rendered onto a surface. The dense blue appears as the emulsion washes away. The whites come back to life. Here is a blueprint of an event, something to think about in the future and simultaneously something that talks about the past. I like to think about cyanotype as a clear range of parameters I set at a point in time that mirrors a mindset, a series of objects and photographs I felt worth showing at the moment.

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<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A field Guide for Getting Lost : The Blue of Distance*, Penguins Books Editions, 2006, p

## **Suspended Spaces: A Posthumous Collaboration with Charles Gagnon**

*Galerie René Blouin, Montréal, 2019*

This project started in 2018 when I was commissioned to realize an exhibition at Galerie René Blouin for September 2019. I wanted to use the gallery itself as a site of creation and meaning. Since the gallery has a deep history in the Canadian art world, I wanted to use this history as a material for research. Since I've previously worked with other artists and / or their work, I wanted to engage in an inter- generational dialogue with an artist who was once represented by the gallery but is no longer living. Although, I understand that « dialogue » can't really happen if the other isn't participating. Hence the exhibition was a posthumous collaboration. According to the *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 'Posthumous' first appeared in 1668, where it was defined in literary terms: « It is a Posthumous work, which never underwent the last hand or Pencil of the judicious Author<sup>10</sup>. » As such, its provenance is solidly situated in the realm of artistic production. What is left are works of art and their idiosyncratic materiality. In that way, it is participating in a conversation beyond the artist's self.<sup>11</sup> Posthumous collaboration requires thinking through the specificity of exhibition making and how to articulate meaning between artworks through a curation process. For me, the posthumous collaboration, in this context, is a visual utterance of me being there in this gallery

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<sup>10</sup> William Henry Fox Talbot

<sup>11</sup> Monika Kin Gagnon, *Posthumous Collaboration*, Prefix Photo, Vol 10, No. 2, Archival Legacies, Toronto, 2009, p. 21-25



reaching out to an artist that belonged here in a distant past. The reason why I chose him is a personal choice of my own. I felt I could relate to his work in many ways. Especially at this moment in time, I could relate to a specific period of his work where his practice transitioned from only painting to multidisciplinary.

Some of Gagnon's photographs were outstanding in the way he used them as a hybrid material for his paintings. He was using the specificity of the medium to challenge the meaning of the photographic image by overexposing parts of it and identifying those areas with numbers. Therefore, he was leaving us with a ghostly shape in the image. For example, in a landscape image of the Arizona desert, Gagnon partly overexposed an image of a Tucson's desert tall cacti, leaving their blacked-out shadows and identifying each of them with a number. The cacti's shadow are now protagonists of a desert landscape, almost as if they were part of a scene from a western movie. Gagnon assembled those photographs with a monochromatic painting that bared the same numbers in the same areas on the surface of the canvas. Presented as diptychs in a custom made frame, both parts of the work were mimicking each other and at the same time, telling a different story from a medium specific perspective. One was setting a clear black and white desert landscape with the post-production trickery of the graphic designer inserting numbers and sometimes letters. And on the other hand, the painter's monochromatic gestures of the brush strokes, coloring the surface of a earthy red oil based paint. The artist was intentionally leaving us with questions regarding language,

narrativity and how that translates into painting.<sup>12</sup> The way Gagnon translated part of his photography work in his paintings in the late sixties and seventies were clearly identifiable. His black painted stripe all around the surface (mimicking the film frame) surrounding the almost monochromatic painting made it clear about his intention of crossing boundaries in between medium. A blank painting with a black painted frame was also part of a background for his film *The Sound of Space* 1967-1968. He also started dividing parts of his paintings as if they were reframed or by combining photographic images with them.

Working mostly with his son Eames and sometimes with his widow, Michiko, I've been able to deepen my knowledge beyond the readings I went through in my research about the artist. I could also identify a specific period where Gagnon was, at a moment of his career, renewing his language. In the early sixties, he decided to start working with photography, cyanotype and then moved on to film and experimental sound composition. During that time, he stopped painting for a few years. He also took a workshop with American photographer Robert Frank<sup>13</sup>. It is in this specific period of time and the decade after that I was interested in-as it was a period in which Gagnon was challenging his current knowledge and practice and was renewing his language and learning new techniques and mediums. I could relate to that specific moment in time because I was in

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<sup>12</sup> Philip Fry, Charles Gagnon, Musée des beaux arts de Montréal, Montréal, 1978, p. 94 - 98

<sup>13</sup> Robert Frank (born 1924) is a Swiss / American photographer and documentary filmmaker. He is known notably for his book titled *The Americans*, published in 1958. This book remains one of the most influential photography book of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

the middle of my MFA at the University of Texas at Austin. I was also renewing my language and learning new techniques and mediums. The way Gagnon translated part of his photography work in his paintings in the late sixties and seventies were clearly identifiable.

In that sense I wanted to do the same with my cyanotype series but the other way around. I wanted to make a photography look like a painting in order to respond to his paintings and cyanotype works. My cyanotype series *Foundation* 2019 would come into dialogue with Gagnon's paintings *Plumblin* #2 1968 and *Space-Blind Dark* 1968. For my series *Field Works*, I was also interested in a hybrid way of working with photography and sculpture by using the image and the frame as autonomous component coming together in a way that helped each other. For instance, the frame would be made of a square metal profile and shape as an outline of a window. Then I would insert the image in an area to a size where it would partially fit from one side to another and serve as a partial view of what could be suggested as a « view » from the window. These themes, the window, the frame, the black and white, the film, came about in most of Gagnon's work and mine for the exhibition.

## **LAYERING SCREENS: AN EXPANDED NOMENCLATURE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY**

### **The tipping point of image and space**

In November 2019 I opened an exhibition including two bodies of works gathered around one installation that were exhibited under the title *Sans Filtre*. The exhibition consisted of grouping a series of photographs titled *Surfaces* and a series of photographic works combining custom metal frames, wall papers and UV prints on metal plates titled *Expanded Nomenclature*. In the middle of the space there was an installation composed of large metal frames and black painted benches bearing the same title as the show. *Surfaces* is a series of diptychs showing a partial view of a projected image and the space next to it. Each diptych is composed of an image shot twice. The images are separated by a small timeframe. It allows a slight shift of content in between shots; small changes were made to the camera settings such as focusing on a different area or turning the image upside down in post-production. In doing so, I wanted to point to something different in each one. Whether it's the foreground or the background, the moving image on a pixelated projection or its bright light being reflected on the wall, I'm interested in the junction point of the projected image into space. It's a border between two instances: the artist and the viewer. I see it as an interface. The screen is a thin area where two realities

meet and interact. I'm interested in taking a step back and capturing the architectures designed for these meeting spaces.

My curiosity about screens is generated by an interest to understand how we look at images and how we interact with the proposed device. I want to grasp that environment and challenge the viewer in looking at them differently. I want to interrupt, to divide, to juxtapose, to layer over and over and to frame and reframe the space of looking. This is what *Sans Filtre*, the installation in the middle of the exhibition space, is about. As you walk around it, you can look at the works hung on the wall through the free-standing frames. Sitting on the benches gives you an unusual perspective on them as well. However, the benches in the exhibition space feel and function more like sculptures serving an aesthetic experience than a function of providing a place of sitting and looking. The work acts as a layer in between the viewer and the other artworks on the wall. It is like looking outside through a mesh and the window. The moiré comes as a disrupting effect to the landscape scenery behind the screen. *Sans Filtre* activates the space as an interface of the exhibition and therefore making the experience of the whole exhibition almost always altered by its presence. I wanted to put forward the space of an image and bring it into dialogue with a work that act as a device for looking. The image appears in a sculptural conversation and the sculpture in a photographic conversation.

## **In constant reconfiguration: the hypothesis as a creative process**

I have worked in a way where the artwork I've been making is always in constant response to a space. The works from the series *Expanded Nomenclature* are always configured to the space where they are exhibited. Depending on how the exhibition room is designed, which artwork is next to them and the context around the exhibition, some elements in the work will be printed at different scale and hung differently. The color and the number of images will vary. They are half imagination and half proposition based on a number of factors in the surrounding environment of exhibition space. In that sense, what I try to put forward is the idea of movement and adaptability. I want these works, each time, to be a singular proposition tailored to where it currently is. I want them to be contingent to my apprehension. Being reconfigurable doesn't mean it is one hundred percent right about what it proposes. There is an element of vulnerability as well. The work has its own limitations. In a few texts on artists David Maljkovic, Roman Ondak and Gerard Byrne, art critic and curator Andrea Viliani talks about contemporary art practices referring to a form of knowledge supplied by hypothesis. He emphasises that the hypothesis is not pure imagination:

« A hypothesis is a proposed explanation for an observable phenomenon and refers to a provisional idea whose validity requires evaluation. Since it needs more work by the researcher in order to either confirm or disprove it, the hypothesis is a free zone where the possible and the impossible meet, being at the same time something and nothing.

Existing as definite, at least until denied or proven to be totally false, the hypothesis is a legitimate imagination that occupies (although temporary an awaiting assessment) the space and time of reality, even though it does not belong to it. Something we are unable to label with certainty; neither true nor, conversely, false. »<sup>14</sup>

Viliani develops the idea of an art work as a hypothesis when a work is in fact a temporary probability. The possibilities are floating between potentiality and actualisation and therefore the discourse is very much about a point in time and a space or a place. The work is a response to a given environment and a set of parameters related to it. My series *Expanded Nomenclature* are time capsules that belong to a where, when and why. Every iteration is a new representation. Each piece include images that are present in all iterations, but are displayed differently, cropped, larger, smaller or printed on a different substrate. The process of taking an image may vary, depending on how I want to speak about the subject. For example, a photograph of a screen, taken with a digital camera will be a representation of it as closer to what it is. But a photo taken with a polaroid camera will speak differently about it since the Polaroid sets a perspective of its own. Because of its known history of how it's been used for decades, it will bring an experience that may be framed in the document of study or a the distant memory. Then the display strategies also add layers to the meaning and experience of the work. Continuing with the Polaroid as an example, showing it as is on the wall as part of an

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<sup>14</sup> Andrea Viliani, *David Maljkovic's set-ups : An Exchange*, David Maljkovic : Sources in the Air, JRP | Ringier Kunstverlag AG, Zurich, 2013, p. 2

assemblage of other printed photographs and framing devices, will contribute to the group for what it is, a vernacular object. It should be read as such and contribute in a peculiar way to the overall piece. But then, if the Polaroid is scanned and reprinted much larger, it will be read differently. This strategy opt for a magnifying way to look at the Polaroid. It is no longer the vernacular object, but an image of it. And depending on how the digitalized image has been modified and / or on what substrate it's been printed, it will greatly affect our experience of it.

The title of this series is a metaphor of an expanded system where new sets of parameters have been added to the medium of photography. The word nomenclature, which in short means: an instance of naming, comes as if the works were emancipated from their previous ideology along with its parameters. This series is a statement to new strategies and new technologies for image based practices to evolve in a broader and more inclusive creative process and to reconsider what is photography in their work.

### ***Layering Screens***

*Thin Hard/Soft Layers* refers to the multiplicity of experiences as we are constantly exposed to a vast quantity of images. They are filters of reality. After passing through various editing and screening devices, images reach us with an intention. They are no



longer objective documents with a neutral purpose. Whether it is for selling a product or manipulating our mind with confusing politics, images are part of our daily lives and our brains are wired to filter a feed of image-based information. We find ourselves absorbed into screens: our phones, computer, tv, etc. in constant search of another new image/message that connects us to a virtual concept of reality. For me photography is not only about the photographer, the camera or the photographic object but about images that surround us every day. Being conscious of this and translating that reality into space is what I am trying to achieve as an artist.

My current research focuses on digital imaging technologies and how these structures shape our perception of photography. I experiment with techniques that expand photography away from its 2D surface. Through images that have a physical presence I combine alternative photography processes, UV printing, inkjet printing and metal framing to make installation artworks that are imbedded with images. For me, photography has its own conceptual architecture and that is what I am trying translate into space through various strategies of making. For my thesis project, I am investigating what is on both sides of the *window (Why a window?)* frame. I want to show a body of work that integrates an architectural intervention tailored to VAC's space with square profile metal poles, wallpapers, frame and unframed photographs and decaying (half molten) vinyl photographs hung onto metal structures. I want to suggest a new model of seeing and experiencing photography that stems from our anxiety that we experience as humans toward in the everyday exposure to images.

## **CONCLUSION**

My photographs are images without answers. They feel more than they tell. In that sense, I am not trying to depict or represent something but rather I try to open a breach. I want them to reverberate a process that appears in many layers. I want them to be textures that activate an aesthetic experience which extend the image to another level of representation that encompass a broader set of parameters. Photography is time fixed and space flattened. My photographs are textures and movements.

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